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The ideal of liberal learning should be bonded with a sense of the utilitarian, the professional. Modern students call not for a traditional liberal learning but a learning directed to action, to improving the social order and the environment. Colleges can achieve a new synthesis of liberal and professional learning by making graduate and undergraduate professional education more humane and intellectual, adding a devotion to social purpose to traditional academic studies, and providing a new path to liberal education through some of the insights and methods of transformed professional education. At SUNY Buffalo, the 7 Faculties have been reorganized to include within each Faculty the applied and the theoretical fields. The faculty is thus reminded of social and moral implications of their work, the relatedness rather than the compartmentalization of knowledge. The new spirit, a new kind of romanticism, captivating many students and faculty, is part of an intense exploration of individual freedom. Liberal learning should use this energy in turning its intelligence upon nature, society and history to see how institutions can be bettered. Concern for service, tempered by a sense of history, enhances the academic purposes of a university, though it can best serve as an intellectual base, not an arena, of action. Universities should project themselves toward social vocation, the fusing of perception and awareness, based on liberal learning. (JS)

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PLAY FOR MORTAL STAKES: VOCATION AND THE LIBERAL LEARNING

BY

Martin Meyerson, President
State University of New York at Buffalo
Lunch Speech, Association of American Colleges
55th Annual Meeting - Pittsburgh
15 January 1969

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Play For Mortal Stakes: Vocation and the Liberal Learning

In the hope of achieving a mite of the sublime simplicity of a poet, I shall draw upon Robert Frost to set my mood. He wrote:

> My object in living is to unite
> My avocation and my vocation
> As my two eyes make one in sight.
> Only where love and need are one
> And the work is play for mortal stakes
> Is the deed ever really done
> For Heaven and the future's sakes.

Like Frost, I shall deal with the communion of love and need, avocation and vocation. The ideal of the liberal learning intrinsically valued is losing lustre. I shall argue that it ought to be bonded with a sense of the instrumental, the utilitarian, the professional. However, the sense of vocation of which I shall speak partakes more of its meaning as moral call or summons than of job alone.

Of course, the case for the liberal learning, whether modified or not, has not been won. The voices -- and I count mine among them -- for an education which exposes students to the humanistic and scientific achievements of man's past and present, and to the various methods through which truth is sought are relatively few. But, the rhetoric of the past case appears tainted to a new generation of students who often speak scornfully of learning for its own sake. With their slogans about authenticity, commitment and relevance, they ask not for the traditional liberal learning but for a learning directed to action.

Their slogans sometimes may be naive and the consequences of their quest may even lead to a know-nothingness and an anti-intellectual posture. Yet, in this and in other ways, our students have been our conscience. The more sophisticated among them have made the conventional case for the liberal learning seem like a caricature. Indeed, it has frequently been a caricature: I am reminded of the response of a Bishop of Oxford, when queried hundreds of years ago as to why his nephew should study classical languages. He replied that it was in order to read scripture in the original, have proper contempt for those who cannot, and eventually rise to a position of emolument in the Church.

As in Frost's poem, I urge that in the years ahead, we unite the profession, the calling with the liberal learning. If we do not, we shall have failed the rightful aspirations of many of the young. My added caution is that unless we imbue vocation with a sense of the liberal learning we shall have failed to improve life as well.

In considering these questions I turned again to the writings of Robert Hutchins, who, over thirty years ago, entitled his key educational book, like Thorstein Veblen, another twenty years earlier, The Higher Learning in America. Hutchins attacked the concepts of a false democracy, the erroneous notions of

progress, and the distorted ideas of utility, particularly monetary utility, which marred the higher learning in America. Few of the weaknesses of our higher education have been profoundly corrected since. The maladies pointed out in his social-intellectual diagnosis of America have not been eliminiated. American colleges and universities are suffering a malaise as acute as when Hutchins wrote. Yet, as I read this book of Hutchins, more than a score of years since I first knew it, I felt in some ways his vision to rest on other bases than my own, and I found his answers not the apt versicles for our age and the times to come.

A main point of Hutchins is that all life will be false or awry, unless man is steeped in an intrinsically valued learning. Part of his writing flayed a mindless and trivial vocational learning. However, our society has since developed new contours, momentums, and directions. We have with us now a generation of youth, many of whom desire through education, an understanding instrumentally valuable in improving the social order and the environment.

On any given day -- indeed, on many given days -- what they say may be wrong. But basically their discounting of the presumably value-free learning inherited from the German university, and their urges for bettering the world are laudable. The challenge is to meld the liberal or intrinsic learning, valued for itself, and the instrumental learning valued for the social use it can achieve. The sequence of educated effort should include the intrinsic, with learning for its own sake, but not rest there; it ought properly to encompass the instrumental, and not stop there, but to continue toward intelligent transformation of whatever has come under view: one's own character, or a laboratory apparatus, or a bureaucratic procedure, or an entire social institution. I would suggest the concept of social vocation as binding these concerns together, and as implying men and women immersed with the help of fine teaching in a general education, constituted by the same help to a knowledge of the social and natural environment that envelops them, and able, through a profession or calling, to improve that environment through the best that is in them and available to them.

The great opportunity I see for the colleges and universities is to achieve a new synthesis of liberal and professional learning and to respond to a new cultural spirit in our students by doing so. I propose these tasks: transforming professional education for undergraduates and graduates alike by making it more humane and intellectual; adding to the intrinsically valuable traditional academic studies that devotion to social purpose which is so typically a part of the spirit of service of the professions, (by so doing we may give those students who find the traditional studies empty of purpose a sense of their ultimate relevance); and, providing a new path to liberal education through some of the methods, insights and research of transformed professional education. It is time we realized that a sense of vocation can be supportive of our commitment to the liberal learning.

In order to achieve a sense of the integral, and a marriage between the concrete and the theoretical, the rationalistic and the experimental, my colleagues and I at the State University of New York at Buffalo have reorganized ourselves to reflect a concern that in every academic enterprise matters of theory should never be too distant from those of practice, and that the practical should never be too distant from its source in theory.

Thus, each of our seven Faculties contains elements, the pursuit of which might be considered pure and theoretical, or which involves learning for its own sake. Each Faculty also contains, as part of its mission, an applied field, or a professional school, where considerations of the concrete and useful have priority. For example, in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Administration, we have the basic social sciences, such as economics and sociology; we also have the schools of management and of social welfare encompassing a broad spectrum of the applied social sciences including attention to the needs of the poor. Putting the theoretical fields in the same faculty as the applied fields not only provides them with a laboratory in which to test their theories, but also brings before them a constant reminder of the social and moral implications of their work.

As another example, our Faculty of Arts and Letters brings together the performing arts of music and theatre, and painting and sculpture and literature, as well as the more theoretical studies of these arts such as those which go by the name of aesthetics. In such a faculty new and exciting developments in creative arts may be stimulated while at the same time an anchorage in scholarly pursuits is maintained. An aesthetic divorced from the lived experience of the artist becomes empty and sterile for student and teacher alike. The practice of an art which is divorced from its fundamentals and its historical values is likely to become Philistine or else so highly subjective as to become uncommunicative. A college ought to keep before the student the concept that he is both the heir to and the cultural contemporary of a Homer, a Rembrandt, a Palladio.

Cardinal Newman beautifully stated the educational aim for the professional in the setting of the humane intellectual university. He said, "he is kept from extravagance by the very rivalry of other studies, he has gained from them a special illumination and largeness of mind and freedom and self-possession, and he treats his own in consequence with a philosophy and a recourse which belong not to the study itself, but to his liberal education."

On my campus, we are attempting to transform professional education by making it more intellectual, reflective, liberal, by increasing its theoretical understanding, by sharpening research and methodology, by questioning accepted practices, and by educating men and women who are flexible, civilized, and responsible. Only in this way can we provide for true utility -- not only to help the engineer, the communication specialist,the teacher, to be prepared to function as a professional ten and fifteen years from now, but to make him more responsive to the new tasks he is bound to be called upon to undertake through enlarging his understanding of the natures and origins and purposes of his calling and of the society which he serves.

Any path to a liberal education must deal with the relatedness of knowledge rather than its separatedness or its compartmentalized disciplines; and the spectrum of knowledge is wide, covering not only mind but body and soul as well. Awareness of the meaning of a profession should not dawn upon a student in graduate school or law school or medical school, or engineering school, or social welfare school. The illumination should clearly begin early. Imaginative undergraduate teaching can show that a calling or profession satisfies the inner hunger as a moral commitment and a mode of self-expression, while answering the outer call as an authoritative cause and a means of social regeneration. The liberal learning must recognize the validity and promise in the social ferment that involves students; and must suggest ways in which they may lose themselves and find themselves in the transformation of our society.

In this discussion of the linkage of liberal to professional education, I am most mindful of the new student spirit. The spirit, which has captivated many students and young faculty, is a kind of new romanticism. Its roots are only partly intellectual, for the new spirit is emotional, impetuous, and oftentimes angry and rebellious. It sometimes seeks to erase authority and to dismiss the past. It rejects dogma and is given to spontaneity. It seeks visual and affective expression as well as extensive intellectual play. Some of the spirit is expressed in art, poetry, theatre, music, dance, and literature. It must not be forgotten that the arts today, like the arts of the past, show us beauty where our eyes and ears are not accustomed to see it. Like Wordsworth, who saw a new beauty in common language and common objects, our visual artists see beauty in common objects of our environment, and bring into a new and, to our eyes, strangely ordered relationship these elements of our culture. This spirit, this search for new relationships and new beauty is apparent in both high and low, or popular, culture; in music, for example, we have the innovative sounds, silences and rhythms of both a John Cage and new rock. Colleges and universities are ceasing to be the strong-hold of the verbal and the quantitative alone.

This new spirit has earlier origins. The parallels with late eighteenth and nineteenth century romanticism are many. The personal behavior of a Lord Byron, the strange attraction to drugs of a Coleradge and a DeQuincey, the rhetoric of the nineteenth century struggle in Greece, the cult of youth, the almost Freudian belief of a Goethe and others in the unconscious, the primitive the supernatural, the exploration of the infinite potentialities of the self -- all seem familiar once again.

We cannot dismiss the new romanticism or irrationalism any more than we can the old. For the new romanticism, like the old, is a part of an intense exploration of the meaning of individual freedom, not only from what seem to the young to be various forms of bureaucratic and political tyranny whether in Washington, unions, corporations or universities, but from some forms and habits of stereotyped intellectual and artistic custom. What may puzzle us now, because we cannot see the end of what is beginning, may well be the beginnings of a new and responsible dimension in society as well as on the campus.

After all, we owe much to that earlier romanticism which helped establish the political liberties of Europe and the importance of the individual in our culture, and which left us a great legacy of art. In looking at the new spirit, we shall surely want to endorse the sense of social concern. Remember that whatever else contemporary students are, in recent years they have been the generation of volunteers in the cause of the needy whether in the South or the slums of the Northern cities or the developing countries of the world. Very many of the new generation who will inherit our world deny the importance of wealth, name and fame. Some are disillusioned and concerned only with concrete existence for themselves in the here and now. Others are motivated to service in much the inspired and religious way St. Bernard was. I applaud this spirit while abhoring the excesses of nihilistic behavior we also see.

I am proposing that colleges and universities respond to the intense outpouring of spirit among the young which we see around us through a new synthesis of the liberal and the professional. Historically, a profession is not only the trustee of a body of learning, but it is a commitment to service. John Ruskin in considering what constituted a professional suggests that we might define a a professional by the fact that it is his duty, as he put it, "on due occasion" to die for the cause to which he is committed. He notes the due occasion for dying for various professions:

"The Soldier, rather than leave his post in battle.
The Physician, rather than leave his post in plague.
The Pastor, rather than teach Falsehood.
The Lawyer, rather than countenance Injustice."

Ruskin adds,

"For, truly, the man who does not know when
to die, does not know how to live."

This dramatic figure of speech suggests that, in considering the professions, we are considering moral commitments of the highest order. Many of today's students seek to find some authoritative cause, some purpose beyond themselves to which they can commit their energies, which would provide not only a mode for self-expression, but would be socially regenerative as well.

For those who seek service and leadership, the linkage of the liberal learning and the calling in college and university life which I am prescribing, can provide a blend of satisfaction of the mind with social purpose. We must convey to students the concept that a profession is not only an occupation in service to the world but also as the term indicates, a declaration or an affirmation. The resulting amalgam can also provide the means whereby the college and university can help deal with the problems and potentialities of our social life, and, in particular, our urban life.

In asking that the liberal learning turn its intelligence upon nature, society and history to see how man's environment and institutions may be bettered without an unnecessarily traumatic break with the past, I obviously do not flinch from the word service. I know that from one view Jacques Barzun warns against colleges and universities becoming public utilities, and some students from another view allege that they have become mere service stations. (Robert Hutchins, incidentally, beat them to the draw in this comparison by thirty years). But I believe there is a clear and broad road open that has nothing to do with either complaint. The most educationally exciting colleges and universities are those that have the educational wherewithal and discretionary energy that provides and, in turn, profits from involvement in the larger community and society. For example, at the graduate level, a student at a law school that is pioneering in the economics of justice or in court reform is more likely to have his studies benefit by buffeting against reality, than a student where routine law is taught in a conventional way.

In my own field of urban affairs, efficacious community service is a by-product of educational liveliness, and shoddy service a by-product of educational limpness. My concern for service does not refute the fact that the basic focus for a college and university must be its educational program, both liberal and professional. A primary focus on immediate community service will not by itself attract the best minds and hearts to a college or university. Put another way, valuable community service is more likely to flow from the liberal enterprise of the imagination, than a viable college or university is likely to result from practical service to the community.

In the educational synthesis I am urging,the college and university best serve the city and best serve civilization as the intellectual base for action, rather than as the arena of action. Some are tempted, in moral causes, to make

the college a piece of contested turf, or turn the campus into warring terrain. Colleges and universities, however, do not serve best as battlefields, but as places for dreams and plans to begin, that new responsibilities and responsivenesses may ensue from them.

To make the point of social involvement and service in a present context, I shall use the example of black studies. The liberal cum professional learning is not bound to the cause of championing black separatism. But this new learning, fusing the liberal and the social vocation, it seems to me, is required to invest far more deeply in the subject matter of African experiences and Afro-American experience, both North and South. Clearly not all can do this at once with like effectiveness, given the presently limited number of men educated in those matters. But, subjects dealing with black experience are necessary not only because of the wounds of an estranged society, but because of the weakness of an etiolated curriculum. As today constituted, learning is paleface. Many of the young sense more than the rest of us that humanity is at a stage of incipient internationality, and in a state of endemic outrage at maldistribution of justice and rewards. Humanity is multi-colored: redskin, and paleface, black and brown, honey and mahogany, and everything in between. Despite notable recent efforts, the learning in our colleges and universities in many ways has been culture-bound.

Robert Hutchins, thirty years ago did not grant this point, for he said, "Knowledge is truth. The truth is everywhere the same," and supported himself with a footnote from Thomas Aquinas: "In general principles . . . truth or rectitude is the same for all, and is equally known by all." If Aquinas and Hutchins have hold of a truth, how badly it needs demonstration, how much it needs testing by inclusion of multi-cultural studies in the curriculum and thus by the analytical inquiry of scholars and the colloquial debate of students. Unless we expose ourselves to more and different scales and shapes and colors in the human experience, we shall remain a mono-culture.

Parochial knowledge is prejudiced knowledge. Neither is tolerable in an ecumenical age. Thus I am adding a footnote to my proposal for merging the liberal and professional learning: namely that this learning transcend past bounds of race and national culture.

I wish to add another caveat. We must remind the man who would transform society, that if he wishes to be the guarantor of a better future, he must see how he is heritor to the past. When he rails against the daemonic nature of power, he sounds like Martin Luther; when he calls for direct democracy he echoes the 17th century Puritans and 19th century Populists. If he says black is beautiful, he invokes the Song of Solomon; if he quotes Martin Luther King, he owes debt to Mahatma Gandhi; if he feels black rage, Frederick Douglass felt it a hundred years before him and used the heat of his rage to temper the steel of his character.

Let me sum up: the liberal learning in view should project itself toward social vocation, and social vocation should base itself on liberal learning. Colleges and universities ought to develop an overview of humanity that embraces all civilizations, lest it embrace none. Remembering the root word for civilization we must realize that upon our cities it depends. Chiefly in our cities civilization will be enhanced, or from them exiled, as many Romans fled their own unlivable cities long before the barbarians arrived. The liberal learning will not be sufficient until it sensitizes a student to recognize a calling, and enables him to answer that calling. The liberal learning must itself not be afraid to recognize its own inherent social vocation, to lead men to professions and to improving the social order; to insist by

profound analysis of their character, methods, and ethics that the professions be humane; and to insist, by the same analyses, that social transformation rest not on slogans and platitudes, but on the basic energy of intrinsic values. In some of this, the colleges and universities may find it tempting to slip into some of the functions of church or state. But they need not preach, they must not dogmatize, and they must recognize that they cannot of themselves raise housing for the poor or end unemployment. Their aim should be to realize themselves as institutions of higher education, focusing upon their primary mission, learning through teaching, in the sense that Robert Hutchins enjoined, but in a sense enlarged by the creative tensions and productive torsions of our day.

If the liberal learning responds in this larger style, it will dispose men not to so-called "revolutions" that blow away, but to transformations that truly transform. Robert Frost had such a concept in mind when he wrote that "only where love and need are one . . . is the deed ever fully done." In our country now the needs are many, and love is diffuse. Perhaps the colleges and universities are critical today for the perception of need and expression of love, and the fusing of perception and expression in young men and women in what I call social vocation. In such vocation the play is for mortal stakes. We dare not play for less. Only if the colleges and universities respond in such a spirit may we hope that the deed might be really done.